

The Earliest National Meeting of Friends in Ireland

New Evidence as to its Date

IN *The Christian Discipline of the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland* the date of the first General Meeting for all Irish Friends is given as Third Month (May) 1670. This statement is based on Dr. Rutty's *History . . . of the Quakers in Ireland*, published in 1751, in which he says (p. 130), "The General Meetings, consisting of some from each Province, were concluded to be held Half-yearly, on the third and ninth months, the first appointed meeting of which sort was in the third month 1670." The minute book dates from May 1671.

Rutty based the earlier part of his work on the manuscript compiled by Thomas Wight at the end of the seventeenth century, which was seen and corrected by William Edmondson, the first Quaker in Ireland. Wight himself did not come among Friends till 1670.

Evidence has now come to light which indicates that the first National Meeting, as these meetings were called, was held in November 1669. In William Penn's *Irish Journal* under date 5.ix.1669 he records, when in Dublin: "All friends mett at my Lodging to keep ye Nationall meeting, W[illiam] E[dmondson], W[illiam] M[orris] & G[eorge] G[regson] spoak; the sufferings of Friends came before us, Munster & Linster, but Ulster were return'd. A Paper was sent to all ye Provinciall men's-meetings to advise them to be more punctuall in ye regestering of all sufferings; & to transmitt them in briefely to ye nationall meeting. A paper, by way of Adresse was carry'd by W[illiam] M[orris] & W[illiam] P[enn] to ye Mayor who abus'd them, but did not releive ye Prisoners of ye Citty."¹

A confirmation of Penn's account is found in a small book belonging to the long-discontinued Bandon meeting. The title on the cover is *Summary of General Minutes of the National Meeting in Dublin. Collected by order of Munster*

¹ *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 40, 1916, p. 49.

Province¹ Meeting, 1704. On the first page is a much longer title followed by the words, *In an alphabetical way, beginning with the first half year's meeting, which was in the 9th month 1669.*

Under A the first minute is dated 1669, and is as follows : " Applications to Justices of the Peace or Judges of Assizes with their answers and the effects of the same, also all material passages upon Friends' personal addresses to be taken in writing as well as an account of sufferings and brought to half-years' meetings." Turning to S one reads, also under date 1669² : " Sufferings of Friends throughout the nation to be kept an exact account of, whether by magistrates, priests, or tories.³ Especially that in the case of distraint for tythes, priests' dues etc. (so called), the persons' names that distraint be noted, their offices, the sums demanded, the value of what they take away, the names of the persons and for whose use, the time when taken, with the language and expressions of the persons that do it, and whether any be restored that Friends lose nothing of their testimony, and that the cruelty, covetousness and wickedness of the priest may be made manifest to the whole world."

From this it appears that the first National Meeting met in November, 1669. It continued to meet regularly half-yearly until 1797, after which the autumn meeting was discontinued and the gathering became known as the Yearly Meeting.

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¹ The province meetings were similar to the Quarterly meetings.

² And other later dates.

³ Tories were dispossessed Irishmen seeking by robbery and murder to regain the lands which had been taken from them.